

COLLABORATION TOOLS: ENHANCE PRODUCTIVITY AS THE FIRST STEP TO GREATER PROFITABILITY

By Carl Azar

As the construction industry experiences rapid increases in design sophistication, firms are grappling with how to address traditional concerns of raising productivity in the face of heightened complexity and worker shortages. Add to the mix a proliferation of alternative project delivery methods and a growing number of stakeholders, and maintaining—let alone improving—profitability can become a lofty goal. With a renewed focus on effective collaboration, however, this goal can be attained.

According to the sixth annual FMI/Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) Owner Survey Report, 80 percent of project owners in 2005 agreed that there should be formal contractual agreements for collaboration. In addition, 60 percent of owners relied on a contractor's or construction manager's software to track and report on a project's progress, and less than 30 percent of owners specified that a single collaboration software application be used by every company working on a project. Such results indicate that contractors and construction managers have an opportunity to strongly influence the collaborative efforts of a project and provide owners with valuable benefits in terms of cost and time savings. Contractors can also benefit from improved profitability resulting from enhanced productivity.

By understanding the driving forces behind the growing need for collaboration and the tools available to address those needs, construction managers have the potential to enjoy greater efficiency, project success and profitability.

FACTORS THAT PROMOTE COLLABORATION

A number of industry developments are encouraging greater collaboration among construction firms. Foremost among them is schedule compression. For example, as the design-build method of delivery becomes more prevalent, more projects are breaking ground before designs are finalized. An abbreviated timetable complicates manpower and logistics issues and strains existing communication processes. In addition, greater regulation and liability exposure, industry consolidation, and heightened specialty and complexity of designs contribute to the need for improved collaboration.

As in any market sector, the construction industry faces a constant need to improve organizational efficiency in the face of ongoing competition. In the past, tools that improve productivity on an individual basis have provided organizations with a competitive advantage. Construction managers have improved their efficiency using software technology for estimating, resource planning, scheduling, tracking and project accounting. Similarly,

architecture and engineering professionals have increased their productivity with CAD tools, benefiting from greater use of visualization, higher-level modeling and computation. However, as such tools have become standard in the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) industry, the leverage point for added productivity has shifted from enhancing individual productivity to efficiencies brought about by enhancing collective output.

UNDERSTANDING AVAILABLE TOOLS

Using available collaboration technology, project leaders can ensure consistent information and priorities across a team, reduce time spent in communicating with internal and external players, improve accuracy, and ensure the capture and retention of important documents. A number of tools can assist in these efforts and can be arranged in tiers according to their levels of complexity and benefit.

The basic—ad hoc—tier of collaboration tools includes commonly used and accepted technology. From the telephone and fax to e-mail and instant messaging, these technologies foster communication between individuals and sometimes among groups. However, they provide few collaboration benefits with respect to structured sharing of documents, recording and archiving communications, or managing business processes.

The next tier of collaborative tools provides team-oriented capabilities. The use of portal sites, document libraries, and shared task and status lists can make team or project information accessible to internal and external stakeholders, enabling better sharing of information than ad hoc tools. Still, team-level tools often fail to deliver the larger business benefits of capturing and structuring information for use beyond the immediate team or meeting future corporate requirements—including project closeout and turnover. Furthermore, they often lack sufficient security, control and auditing of document access both for operational and legal needs.

Enterprise-class document management tools represent the most advanced tier of collaboration tools and can provide seamless integration across different roles, tasks, departments, organizations and business processes. These tools can deliver business process automation, records management and automated workflow. Bundled together and implemented correctly, such features can significantly affect business efficiency and profitability. Using enterprise document management tools, workers can integrate information within their operational practices, as well as within supporting business departments—inside or outside the corporate firewall.

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DETERMINING THE BEST FIT

An evaluation and selection process to determine the right tools for a particular company should consider both present and future business needs. Comprehensive tools typically offer more flexibility and can accommodate growth better.

Any selection process should also determine when and how collaboration tools will be implemented. Collaboration tools are invaluable in a project's design and construction phases, where they can establish a consistent process and a central repository of documents and communications to ensure that everyone has the right documents at the right time. This feature helps monitor progress and accelerate decision making among project stakeholders.

Owners may find that implementing a collaboration tool for the entire life-cycle of a project provides the greatest benefit, as a facility's long-term operational costs typically dwarf its construction costs. Providing owners with immediate and accurate online information adds value well beyond the construction phase: operations, maintenance and upgrade activities can be rapid, accurate and optimal when owners can maintain precise records of a facility's physical and logical state. Even if not required, contractors can deliver significant value to owners by providing digital documentation at project turnover in a format that facilitates future use by the owner.

Deciding how to share information among project participants is another important consideration. If simply archiving and retrieving documents is sufficient, then tools that provide "static" capabilities could be considered. Static tools do not allow for document

revisions or updating; their purpose is to replace paper files and permit viewing of scanned document images and electronic documents. For optimal collaboration, static tools should feature search capabilities on document contents, support access inside and outside corporate firewalls, and allow for viewing and printing every document type.

"Active" tools provide greater functionality for organizations seeking a more robust document management system. Active tools should provide a number of features, such as document versioning and comparison, document markup, various manual and automated methods of importing new documents, and e-mail management. More robust tools offer extensive workflow capabilities to automate business processes and records management, which ensures the legal retention and disposition of business records.

Whichever tool is selected, it should be extremely accessible and intuitive. By introducing collaboration tools that are integrated into frequently used applications on the familiar PC desktop, organizations can leverage existing knowledge and experience. New tools that require significant training will not be adopted and will become counterproductive as they face user reluctance or rejection.

IMPROVING CHANCES FOR SUCCESS

At their highest level, collaboration tools have the power to create one central source of information to guide a project with many players in many locations, streamlining operations and optimizing efforts both before and after project delivery. Businesses can improve their chances for project success and greater profitability by collaborating through tools available to assist in these ventures. ♦



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